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Senior envoy denies Soviet UN mission is spy-ridden

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WASHINGTON - The senior Soviet diplomat at the United Nations yesterday denied US charges that his staff is riddled with spies, and said a US order to reduce the size of the Soviet missions was illegal.

"All this talk about spying and Soviet personnel being engaged in activities unrelated to the United Nations is utter nonsense," said Vasily Safronchuk, acting permanent Soviet representative to the United Nations.

US officials, in announcing March 8 that they were ordering the Soviets to cut the size of their missions to the United Nations by more than a third, accused them of engaging in "activities unrelated to UN business, including espionage" and said they pose "a threat to US national security."

The cuts, to begin Oct. 1, will reduce the number of Soviet diplomats at the United Nations from 275 to 170 by April 1, 1986. The

announcement of the order noted that the Soviet delegation is greater than the next two largest missions combined - the US, with 126, and the Chinese, with 116.

American officials estimate that 30 to 35 percent of the roughly 1,000 Soviet diplomats and trade representatives in the United States work for either the KGB or the GRU, the Kremlin's two main espionage agencies.

Safronchuk, speaking on the ABC program "This Week with David Brinkley," declined to speculate "on what steps my government is going to take," in response.

But he said the US order violated the 1947 agreement on UN missions, and that he had appealed the matter to the United Nations secretary general.

"This illegal decision of the US government will not help to create favorable conditions" for a meeting proposed for later this year between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, he said.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Soviet Premier Nikolai I. Ryzhkov met Saturday in Sweden at the funeral for Olof Palme, the assassinated prime minister, but did not set a date for the summit, which was agreed upon by Reagan and Gorbachev last November in Geneva.